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ABSTRACT

The shock of reentry for any sojourner upon returning to their native land may be as great, if not greater, than the initial adjustment period that occurs upon arrival in the foreign country. Intercultural travelers should prepare for the reentry process and the resultant cultural lag upon their return home with the same care that they practiced in preparing for their initial departure. The paper discusses the experiences of a teacher who spent a year in China teaching English language instructors in the remote northern city of Daqing. Even though 4 months were spent preparing for departure, the reintegration into U.S. society upon return presented physical and psychological difficulties. The Chinese experience had dramatically changed perceptions of the individual self, social values, the United States, China, and the world at large. The teacher relates what was encountered in China, how one coped with the difficulties encountered there, and the benefits of the Chinese experience. Eventually able to readapt to U.S. society, the English instructor helped the acclimation process by discussing the China experiences with others who had taught in China; advising those who were about to depart for China; maintaining correspondence with Chinese friends; continuing to study calligraphy; and searching for the most challenging job available upon return to the United States. (PPB)

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Editor's Introduction

In this fourteenth number of AFS's *Occasional Papers in Intercultural Learning*, we again present a first-person account of a cross-cultural experience. In this case, however, the focus for the article is the author's adjustment difficulties upon returning home to New York City after spending a year teaching in the remote, bitterly cold Chinese city of Daqing, in the northern province of Heilongjiang.

Ms. Miller's very personal and moving account is more than a fascinating case study of intercultural learning during and after a sojourn abroad. It is an evocative story that will strike a familiar chord in the heart of any former expatriate who has had to cope with unexpected difficulties upon returning home. It suggests a useful new term--*culture lag*, analogous to jet lag -- to theoreticians in the intercultural field. And it is a call for renewed efforts by intercultural practitioners everywhere to treat sojourners' preparations for the return home as seriously as they always have treated sojourners' initial preparations for the experience in the host country.

Author's Dedication

To my husband.
He gave me more than support;
he gave me encouragement.

Reflections on Reentry After Teaching in China

by Marcia D. Miller

I spent a year teaching in an isolated town in northeast China. It was a productive, rewarding, but difficult year and towards the end of that time I dreamed about returning to my home. I anticipated a few difficult days of readjustment, but no undue trauma. For several years prior to living in China, I had taken extended trips and suffered little on returning. I was starved for the cultural life of New York and sure that I would soon be caught up in the vitality and satisfactions of my customary life there. I yearned to visit my favorite bookstores, eat at the ethnic restaurants I liked, see some of the films I had missed, go to dance concerts, and most importantly, tell my family and friends about my China experience. I was certain that people would be as interested in hearing my story as I would be in telling it. My personal relationships, I assumed, would be easily resumed because I had been a diligent, attentive correspondent. I had prepared for going to China by reading widely, speaking to returned teachers, and trying to learn as much as I could about the country. I did not prepare for reentry. I was concerned about employment and made some inquiries by mail. But how much could I prepare? And why should it be necessary to prepare to go home? After all, I knew exactly what I was coming back to.

I was wrong.

I did not have a few days of difficulty, but six months. The shock of my reentry was all the more severe because it was totally unexpected. I had changed and my perceptions of my world had changed. For it was not just that I had been away from my home for a year. No, it was much more than that. China, the language and the people, had become my primary concern. That country was no longer a place I could read about in newspapers and dismiss as another bit of international news. I was no longer removed from its political happenings. China was a place where I knew people for whom I cared deeply; the details of their lives, even the weather conditions affecting them, absorbed me. In a word, my overseas teaching experience caused a seminal change in my concepts about China, my own country, and myself.

Since my return, I have frequently been asked, "Why did you go abroad to teach?" And, "Why China?"

Several years ago, when I was teaching immigrants, the idea of teaching abroad for a year began to germinate in my mind. At that time my family responsibilities were heavy. However, I resolved that one day I would pursue this dream. Finally, when my younger son filed applications for college, I filed an application for teaching abroad. I requested a position somewhere in Southeast Asia or Oceania. It was to these areas that I felt spiritually and culturally drawn, having visited them previously. But as the weeks went by and the answers I received were unsatisfactory, the director of the program that was sponsoring me asked, "How about China?" "China," I replied aghast, "I can't go to China. It's too far away." Of course I never meant that it was too far physically, but in my imagination it was farther than the moon. Moreover, Chinese civilization had never much interested me. But after a moment's reflection, I agreed. Yes indeed, why not China?

Within a few weeks, I received three requests to teach there. One was an offer from Beijing, which I immediately rejected. I had decided that if I would go to China, I would go to a place where I would have an undiluted, authentic experience. I did not want to be in a capital city with a large expatriate population. The second invitation was from a school in a heavily industrialized city where I also preferred not to go. The third request was from Daqing, a place I knew to be isolated, bitterly cold for many months, and where I would be the only foreign expert. This offer was in the form of a detailed twelve-page letter written in an engaging manner by the young woman who would be my aide. I read the letter and I thought, Yes. It was one of those instantaneous, instinctive decisions that we all make in life, and even now, after I have been home for two years, I still feel that, yes, I made the right decision.

It is difficult for Westerners to comprehend what the name Daqing (pronounced dah-ching) means to the Chinese. Because we have enjoyed a prolonged and gradual period of industrialization, we cannot point to one name that was such a watershed in our history. The name Daqing carries a sense of potency and affirmation, as it was the discovery of oil there on September 26, 1959, that electrified the war-torn, exhausted imagination of China. That one event dramatically and immediately opened the door of industrial possibilities while assuring that future energy needs could be met with the country's own resources. Exploratory drilling had begun there in 1949, aided by technical assistance from the Soviet Union. When that country withdrew, Chinese technicians continued working independently and a few days before the tenth anniversary of the founding of the P.R.C., the Number 3 Exploratory Well yielded oil. Daqing instantly became a household word. It was like a neon sign that flashed on simultaneously all over China. For twenty years, the site supplied four-fifths of China's oil and was held up as a model for industry, as a triumph of spirit and diligence over circumstance. Secondary school children from miles around rotated

work-study tours on the oil fields. Living conditions were unimaginably harsh. During the raging winters, workers lived in unheated Quonset huts. It was only in 1975, after an explicit order from Premier Zhou Enlai himself, that modern accommodations were built.

What happened in this famous town of Daqing to cause such a seminal change in my perceptions and to make my readjustment to North American life so problematic?

In order to answer those questions, I will try to give a truthful, balanced picture of life as I found it in 1984-85 at Daqing Teachers' College in Heilongjiang Province. China is a country of fine distinctions and strong localisms. It is not possible to speak of it as a unified country for a teaching or study assignment. There are a multiplicity of arrangements and institutions and each arrangement and each institution is a different experience. The big city experience -- Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou -- is as distinct from the provincial or rural experience as New York City is from an Eskimo settlement. The sojourner must be sensitive to these distinctions and understand that local attitudes toward foreigners depend upon the financial set-up of local institutions, the stability of their political organizations, and the previous experiences that local Chinese people have had with foreigners. And I can assure you that these experiences have not always been pleasant. But even with the best advice, much depends on luck and the capability of one's aide or interpreter, who is the key person in the foreign teacher's life.

After four months of thoughtful preparation, accompanied by two large suitcases, two small ones, and all the determination and enthusiasm I could muster, I departed. After twenty-two hours by plane from New York City to Beijing and another twenty-two hours by train from Beijing to Daqing, at last I arrived.

What did I find?

First, the negatives: The landscape was bleak, barren, desolate, and windy. For months it was bitterly cold: thirty degrees below zero not counting the wind that roared down unimpeded from Siberia. I remember one December afternoon when I walked home after a school show. I felt that my body was being punctured by needles of ice. I climbed the steps to my apartment and threw myself face down, fully clothed, boots and all, on my quilt and lay there for twenty minutes before I could believe I was still alive.

The food was of uneven quality, with little variety, especially in late winter. There was no refrigerator; anything that needed to be kept cold or frozen was simply placed between the two sets of windows that are a standard feature of every building in northern China. In the kitchen was a stone sink with one faucet and out of that faucet came ice-cold water. There were no elevators, which meant that in an ordinary day it was necessary for me to climb at least twenty-two flights of steps.

The worst problem was the isolation. As the year wore on, I had problems with my mail. The six to twelve letters that I had been receiving weekly dwindled to one or even none. Furthermore, I disliked being under scrutiny as the only Westerner in the area. Every aspect of my life was monitored -- my walks, mail, food, visitors to my home. Children pointed at me and burst into tears. I knew that my behavior was being discussed. It was hard to live in a glass cage. For that year, I spoke to no one of what was in my heart. I ate 800 meals alone in a large empty room. There was no cultural life -- no bookstores, no films, no concerts, no restaurants.

Now, some of these negatives can be turned around. It is true that it was cold outside, but indoors we had wonderful central heating. It is true that my diet was restricted, but I learned to place less emphasis on food. And I grew stronger and slimmer having to climb all those steps.

What were the positives?

My personal living conditions were extremely comfortable. I was assigned a three-room apartment. Carpeted in burgundy, papered in blue, it was warm and supplied with a bed-size heating pad, a superb tape recorder, and a color television. Outside the air was crystal clear, as the buildings were heated by oil from the Daqing fields, thus avoiding the pollution from coal dust that afflicts so many Chinese areas. My salary was six times that of a Chinese teacher, enabling me to save most of it and treat my husband to a month's vacation.

My staff of four was endlessly helpful. Zhong Yan, my aide and interpreter, was not merely my right hand, but my right arm. Without her daily help and guidance, I might not have made it. My academic intermediary, or cooperating teacher, smoothed the way between the college and me. My cook did her best, and sometimes that was exemplary, with the limited goods available. My driver drove long distances through ice and snow in order to procure food for me. It must be noted that in north China, ordi-

nary items often take many times longer to obtain than in the West. Take fresh milk for yogurt, for instance. When I returned home, someone inquired, "Do they still use bottles for milk in China?" Noting my incredulous expression, she continued, "Well, what kind of container does the milk come in?" "What kind of container?" I replied. "In north China, it comes in a cow." If I wanted milk, my driver had to drive over an unpaved, deeply rutted road for nearly an hour to a village where there were a few cows. Then he had to find the farmer who probably would be a distance away working on his land, then the farmer had to milk the cow, and then there was the long, icy or dusty (depending on the season) drive back. That was just to get me milk for yogurt, necessary protein for my vegetarian diet. Once the weather warmed up and we had no more natural refrigeration, that expedition had to be repeated a few times a week.

There were other, less easily defined benefits. Most importantly, there was the sense of being in an absolutely safe place, indoors and outdoors, for the first time in my life. I knew that no one would ever harm me in Daqing. This feeling was highlighted by a revelation I had one afternoon as I was strolling through the deserted countryside. One of the great pleasures of living there was taking a long walk to a reservoir located about forty minutes from the college. I tried to take this walk whenever I could, when the weather was not completely against me, as the atmosphere always calmed and revived me. No matter how troubled I was when I set out, invariably I returned home feeling renewed.

One particular afternoon I was walking along wondering why I felt so happy. My work was going well, my adjustment to Chinese life was not without its bumps and grinds, but on the whole was positive. But there was something else, something in my body -- a delicious sense of well-being. I was walking differently, with a kind of ease and rhythm I had never known. Then I realized what it was. For the first time in my life since the day when I was three years old and my mother warned me that I should watch out for the dirty man hiding in the alley, I was walking without fear of being raped. I thought it incredible that I was walking alone on a plain in northern China, that I was totally isolated, that in the distance were mud-brick villages where I knew no one, that I did not know the language, that I had no way of defending myself, yet I knew that I was safe. Foreigners in Daqing do not get raped by Chinese. What a joy, what a relief it was to walk without this burden, this consuming fear that I had never realized I carried within me, having internalized it so carefully.

Along with this sense of physical security were other aspects of life in Daqing that appealed to me enormously. Immediately after my arrival, I noticed the strong sense of community. There was no telephone service, yet people knew who needed help and

gave it willingly. One of my students had to move and since there was no moving company, friends and relatives came with whatever conveyance they could get -- a cart, a truck, a bicycle -- and somehow at the end of a long day, the move was accomplished. One of the Chinese English teachers, hearing that I loved Thanksgiving Day and would miss its celebration, informed me that he had arranged to have our class cancelled. Instead, he single-handedly prepared a twenty-three course meal for our entire class to enjoy. I was the guest of honor in his tiny two-room house.

I admired the dignity of the people, especially the elderly. Unlike the retired aged people in the U.S. who have no clear role in the society, the elderly in China have work to do, which gives them a sense of purpose. The older people are fully integrated members of the society and fulfill essential roles in family life. Friendships, as decreed by Confucius, are precious and long lasting in this culture. I remember one day being introduced by my aide to a retired teacher who was walking arm in arm with her "classmate". Both women were well over sixty and had retained their friendship since their middle school days. Classmate is a revered word, implying life-long loyalty. Teacher/student and student/student relationships are special, cultivated.

I also responded positively to the lack of emotionalism and the ability to hold one's tongue. These two traits of the Chinese can, of course, be carried to the extreme of opaqueness that inhibits understanding, but generally they contribute to a dependable and reassuring sense of harmony.

Academically, as well, there were positive and negative aspects of the experience. The students, who upon graduation would become middle school teachers, were not generally cheered by that prospect. Consequently, many were insufficiently motivated. Materials at the college were very limited. Fortunately, I was able to teach the Chinese English teachers and was permitted to organize my own syllabus. I lived for that class and devised a program largely supplemented by my own materials.

Having answered the question, "What did I find?" we can now move on to a second question: "What was most useful or how can a prospective teacher or student prepare for this type of assignment?"

Here we must deal with tangibles and intangibles. The tangibles are easier. I would suggest that you leave your clothes and shoes at home, as these items are excellent and inexpensive in China. Instead, fill your suitcases with books, magazines, and espe-

cially audiotapes. If you go to an isolated place as I did, you will be a one-person resource center. I found that although my specialized knowledge of English was necessary, it was my general knowledge, all the information I had obtained simply by living, that was most useful. The student population's exposure to world events and historical developments had been narrow. No one believed me, for example, when I explained the significance and age of the cave paintings in Lascaux.

The intangibles are more difficult. First are your attitudes. I suggest that, while it is necessary to be firm, prompt, and self-protective, it is essential never, never to express anger. Soon after my return to America, I met a young woman, also recently returned, who cursed her Chinese experience. When she had arrived at her teaching post she was informed that an apartment was not yet ready for her and that she would have to sleep in the guest house kitchen. She agreed. One month later and still living there, she exploded in anger. An apartment was promptly found, but from then on, everything else became a major problem -- classes, mail, food, vacations. Every request was blocked by the school authorities. All her problems stemmed from that one temper tantrum. Those few uncontrolled minutes made her entire year impossible.

Second, I recommend that you be adaptable. Just as you will leave most of your possessions at home, I suggest that you leave behind your way of thinking. It's only Western logic and it won't do you a bit of good in China. Leave behind your preconceptions of China, especially those fostered by glossy journalistic blurbs written by people who report the news from the coastal cities as if it were representative of the inland rural areas as well, or those brought back by tourists who think they know China after a three-week luxury visit to a few famous spots. But, most of all, leave behind your expectations. Try to be open, as if you were seeing the world for the first time. And be gracious. I witnessed several embarrassing, even mortifying, incidents caused by foreigners in China. Teachers have even been asked to leave because of their inappropriate behavior, which usually took the form of poor classroom preparation or sexual overtures to students.

One last plea: Be truthful about your personal requirements, in particular any health problems. I mention this specifically because, as a cancer patient who must take three medications daily to survive, I was cautioned by several returned teachers not to reveal this, as if it were a deficiency on my part. They assured me that I would have problems with customs, that the college would feel that my medications were a nuisance, and that this attitude would be deflected on to me. I rejected this advice, and I am glad I did. I reasoned that since my medications are not an arbitrary but a mandatory part of my life, this matter was too important to hide. I would have to have

medications mailed to me throughout the year, as it would have been impossible to carry the necessary quantity with me. I decided that to hide this from the school would be to begin our relationship dishonestly. As a matter of fact, there was never a problem with customs and Zhong Yan assured me that had there been any duty assessed, the school would have willingly paid as part of their responsibility for my health care.

When I returned home, an old friend inquired, "Were you ever depressed there?" After reflecting on this, I had to admit that, no, I never had been depressed, which brings me to the next question, "How did I avoid depression?"

The loneliness and isolation sometimes were simply unendurable. Imagine if you can: It is 7 p.m. The wind is howling; it is thirty degrees below zero. The generator has broken down so there is no heat, no water, and no electricity. It is not possible to work or to read as there are only a few candles left. You are lying fully dressed under your quilt in icy darkness and everybody you care about is 13,000 miles away. I admit that at times I felt as if a vise were slowly crushing me to death. Indeed, how did I maintain my emotional balance?

I did it four ways.

First, it was essential to know that there were people who really cared about me. My support system from home -- my family who kept me going by sending a constant stream of letters and monthly packages -- was critical. At my request, my husband sent me essential items such as cough drops, cocoa, bath salts, granola bars, and "snuggies."

Second, there was my Chinese support system, not only the four people who were directly concerned with me but many others. It was obvious to the community that I cared about them. I had many conferences with the president of the college. My apartment was open for evening hours twice a week and sometimes as many as thirty-five students arrived for open discussions. I helped found a debating club and am happy to say that it is still flourishing. There may have been a frozen landscape outside, but inside, when I dealt with people, there was a flower garden.

Third, there was the commitment to my work. For the first time in my life, I was able to fully focus on my work. There was no family to occupy my time, no household responsibilities. There was no telephone nor any place to go. In a word, there were no

distractions and sometimes I had the enormous pleasure of being able to work without interruption for ten hours.

Fourth, I was able to draw on my own inner strength in this situation. It is undeniable that this was a test that I was determined to pass. It was the fulfillment of my dream of working overseas and I knew that I simply had to succeed.

And now the fourth and last question: "Was it worthwhile?"

I have been back for three years and I strongly affirm that it was indeed worthwhile. The costs were enormous, but temporary. The benefits were also enormous, but they, I believe, will be permanent.

What are these benefits? I number five.

One, because I had so much time alone and spent it focusing on my work, I am better, more comprehensively educated. And not just in my field of literature. I am more knowledgeable about many aspects of Chinese civilization and about international affairs. It was my experience in China that sparked my interest in cross-cultural studies.

Two, distance and its concomitant objectivity have helped me to evaluate realistically family relationships and friendships. One gains a different, more rational perspective from far away.

Three, I made two dear Chinese friends with whom I am in constant contact and for whom I would do anything.

Four, I began and continue a love affair, or rather an obsession, with Chinese calligraphy. I gained a skill in and an admiration of this ancient art which brought balance, harmony, and beauty into my life in Daqing and does the same in Manhattan.

Lastly, I have had the incomparable satisfaction of knowing that I did something worthwhile and against considerable odds. I completed an extremely challenging assignment and feel the satisfaction that can come only when one has passed a real test.

* * * * *

During the long trip home, I thought about my return from another year abroad in 1963, when my husband and I had lived in London while he completed a fellowship. That reentry had been relatively easy. And I mistakenly assumed that this one would be also. I reasoned that in the twenty-year interval I had traveled a great deal. I was older, more aware, and more able to handle emotional lability. Also, I was returning to a stable and secure home. It was not as if I had to look for an apartment or a job immediately.

But there were critical differences between the two overseas experiences. I had studied British literature and civilization for years and had felt at home in London immediately. With slight differences, the language was the same. I had continued pretty much my same independent, autonomous way of life there. No one had taken charge of me. Most importantly, I had had someone with whom to constantly share the experience. This mutual sharing had softened the adjustment to London and the readaptation to North America.

In the plane, I sat on the edge of my seat. An hour before landing, I changed my entire outfit, so that I could at least delude myself that I was fresh. I was experiencing no more anxiety than usual on returning from other overseas trips. I was eager to get home -- jubilant, in fact. I had done it, and I had done it alone.

My excitement was so high that I spoke aloud to myself. I made plans. I looked forward to being able to live in a non-ghettoized environment. No one would mark my daily activities. I would appreciate as never before the joy of being anonymous. There would be several newspapers I could read each day. I could travel easily and even purchase round-trip air tickets, an impossibility in China. The telephones in my own home would give me instant local and long distance connections. I could select the consumer items I wanted and not have to settle for the model or size available that week. There would be no need to deal with a constraining bureaucracy. I would not have to carry identity papers every time I left home. I would regain my personal freedom, one of the basic constructs of my life.

These expectations all turned out to be true, of course, but I was tormented by other problems I had never anticipated; they struck me with the force of a physical blow.

I arrived home on a Thursday. At first I was relieved and happy to see that my family was well, that no thunderbolt had struck my apartment because I had left it for a year. When asked what I wanted for my first dinner, I unhesitatingly answered, "A simple salad, plenty of lettuce." What a pleasure! In one year, I had not tasted one piece of lettuce, had not had one salad or one piece of raw vegetable except for some tomatoes at the end of my stay.

But I felt diffident in my own home. It all seemed so strange and although I had cooked for decades before I left for China, I felt like an awkward child when I prepared my egg the following morning. As I walked through our eight rooms and three bathrooms with the image of my Daqing apartment and the Chinese homes I had visited fresh in my mind, my home struck me as being terribly cluttered. We had so much! So many items! Chinese people have as many glasses and plates as there are people in the home. And yet I am known by my friends as having a very orderly home, even sparse.

My husband asked, "Where do you want to go on your first Saturday?" I replied, "Let's just take a walk. I'd like to keep it simple. Through the park, maybe up Broadway." And that is what we did. Of course, I was hoping for a replay of that wonderfully reviving walk I had regularly taken to that reservoir half the world away. But I was already beginning to suspect that this would be no simple, quick adjustment.

We went out and it was not long before I felt I was being pricked by sharp needles. I realized that I was now super-sensitive to cultural norms to which I had rarely paid any attention. It was a hot, sultry day. The park was mobbed with people in all states of dress, wearing clothes that people in Daqing reserve for their beds. I was appalled at people's emotionalism. The overt physical expressions, especially between members of the opposite sex, stunned me. I stared at two people who greeted each other by screaming and embracing. It was so overdone, even hysterical. In Daqing, public behavior is circumspect, characterized by reticence. People greet each other formally. Men and women, even married couples, never touch in public. The young adults whom I taught, ages nineteen to twenty-four, are not permitted to walk together in mixed couples. Boys walk with boys, girls walk with girls, their arms looped together. When my husband came to visit me for my winter vacation, I was very careful to request that he greet me Chinese style, which meant that after not seeing each other for five months, we nodded and spoke a few sentences when we met at the airport.

Walking on Broadway, I thought I was walking through a corridor in an insane asylum. I saw a Nordic type man, huge, covered with thick hair (Chinese do not have much

body hair). The hair that crowned his head was dyed green and pink and stood up four inches. He was wearing heavy mountain climbing boots, shorts that revealed part of his genitals, and a tee shirt that covered a small part of his chest and back. Two blocks later, I saw a black man with his hair dyed blond. He was barefoot, and a green tie hung over his bare chest. A crowd at a busy corner surrounded two angry men who had squared off for a fight. Someone anxious to see the fight jostled me, throwing me off balance. The traffic was dense, the smog was consuming, and the noise, heightened by police sirens, was like a drill in my head. I was frightened.

In north China, people stared at me wherever I went. Here, at home, my role was reversed. Now, I was the one who did the staring. I watched speechlessly as two homeless men prepared their turf on the street by spreading newspapers, cartons, blankets, and a variety of clothing, magazines, broken combs, cigarettes, and food on the ground around them. Twenty yards from this scene, a schizophrenic woman dressed like a clown was screaming, dancing, and singing at people who passed by. This can't be real life, I thought; this must be a show. But it wasn't a show. This was urban life in America. I was perceiving other people according to my Chinese cultural "lenses" and I was horrified. It wasn't that the homeless and the mentally ill were not in evidence before I had gone to China, but as I walked around I realized that this population had exploded in the year I had been away. I had never seen a homeless person, a beggar, or a person behaving uncontrollably in China. As a matter of fact, I have returned twice for long visits and have yet to see people in need like that.

As a counterpoint to that desperate state, it did not take long to notice a marked change in my own neighborhood, a change that shocked and alienated me. It had always been an upper-middle-class area; now it was clearly just upper-class. Prior to my departure for China, housing prices had been creeping up gradually, but I had not paid attention as that increase was a reflection of overall inflation. However, during the year I had been away, property values soared. A week after my return, I was speechless after being informed that our apartment, which we had bought in 1976, was currently valued at ten times the purchase price -- an awesome amount! As an offshoot of this real estate madness, cannibalistic rents had driven out many of the established shops that catered to the residents' practical needs. Those shops were replaced by expensive clothing boutiques guarded by armed men. Many new people lived in my building who did not say hello to me. These people were clearly in a different income bracket than I. Riding in the elevator with them, I felt like a poor cousin temporarily boarding in a rich aunt's home. Although I knew we could easily afford the modest increase in our monthly maintenance charges, I did not want to reside there. In a word, I was distinctly uncomfortable in my home environment and had no hope of changing it.

I was incredulous at the prices and at the waste, the excess. The number of obese people, especially youngsters, shocked me. Diet pills are unknown and unneeded in China. The specter of periodic famine haunts that country; it certainly haunted many of the people I met there, as it is only within the last twenty years that enough food has been produced for its entire population. My students, for example, were given one steamed bun and one small bowl of rice gruel for breakfast every morning. For nearly two semesters, I thought they were nicely rounded, even plumpish. But when the hot weather arrived and they removed their layers of padded clothing, I realized how thin they were.

I was paralyzed by the sight of so much fresh food the first time I tried to shop. I had forgotten what was available in my city, five minutes from my home. There were not a few mounds of tired green vegetables lying on cement, but artistically arranged piles of gorgeously colored fruits and vegetables. The abundance, quality, and variety staggered me. There were three kinds of peppers -- red, green, and yellow. There were four types of tomatoes -- European, South American, local hothouse and organic. I counted five kinds of berries. I could not trust myself to make a decision and left the store empty-handed. I welcome this magnificent choice and wish it on the whole world -- but at reasonable prices. I still blush when I think of the fuss I made the first time I did buy food. Before China, I loved to shop for food and purchased large quantities. But on my first shopping trip after my return, I could only bring myself to place one, just one, zucchini on the scale of the Korean fresh food market where I had shopped for many years. I know the owners; they are trustworthy people. But when the clerk said, "Seventy-five cents" for that one zucchini, I argued that she simply had to be wrong. It was impossible, I assured her. Why, did she know what I could get for seventy-five cents in China? Clearly the scale was unbalanced. I was terrible. Finally, of course, I paid and walked home confused, ashamed that I had made such a fuss, and feeling that I was in a situation that I could neither control nor avoid.

This same desolate feeling of impotence overcame me one evening as my husband and I walked home after our first dinner out. We had gone to a neighborhood Indian restaurant and ordered our usual pre-China meal. Sitting there, I marveled that all the esoteric ingredients in our food could be purchased within a few city blocks. But when the bill arrived and I watched my husband pay an amount equal to six weeks' salary for a Chinese teacher, I felt that my consumption of that meal was reprehensible, that I had committed an immoral act.

I did not belong here. I was physically distanced from China and psychologically distanced from everything at home. I had been isolated in Daqing, but I felt just as iso-

lated here with the additional component of depression. I was uncomfortable in my own home, in my own neighborhood, and with my own husband and children. I had assumed that after a year away, I would happily and willingly readjust to an intimate life. But sustained intimacy, constant interaction even with those for whom one cares deeply, is demanding after a year of living alone. I found family living a rub, a chore. Instead of reintegrating, I felt that the others were the family and I was an extra, a left-over. I was constantly interrupted or at least it seemed that way. I had always suspected that I was a loner, a solitude lover; now that I had had a year alone that suspicion was confirmed. I felt uncertain in all my interpersonal relationships and frequently wondered if I wanted to continue some of my friendships.

This uncertainty was aggravated by my dejection at not being able to communicate to others the intensity of my China experience. I was expected to be much the same person as I was before going to China. But I was no longer that person. I was so saturated with my Daqing experience that I felt I was half Chinese. I may have looked like the same blue-eyed, light-haired Westerner, but a significant part of me had changed radically. I wanted to discuss these changes and have them acknowledged.

I had yearned to return to my customary American cultural life and now found that it did not interest me. I did not want what New York had to offer. After our long separation, my husband looked forward to attending the ballet and opera with me. I accompanied him once and could not concentrate. In Daqing I had prepared nine long pages of detailed notes -- things I must attend to immediately upon return, including a list of thirty books to read. I borrowed a few of those books from a well-stocked library, bought a few more from equally well-stocked bookstores and found that I could not concentrate on any of them either. I felt that, compared to what I was missing, it was all unimportant.

Furthermore, I did not want to be part of a society that included homeless, distraught people begging outside of expensive, guarded boutiques. The two problems about which my students had ceaselessly questioned me -- poverty and the lack of personal safety -- confronted me the first time I ventured outside. I was disappointed and disapproving of American society. It was a frightening scene. How could I justify my participation in what I viewed as an unjustifiable situation? Everything seemed wrong.

I was exhausted. Unable to rest, I slept in spurts. I was bothered by intermittent buzzing in my left ear. I did not understand that these symptoms were physical reactions to stress. After looking forward to eating strawberries, apricots, and other glorious

summer fruits, I found that they did not appeal to me. My appetite had vanished. Being home is not a pleasure, I thought. It is not what I imagined. I wondered why everyone didn't notice that I was different, that I should be treated as a unique person. After all, in Daqing I was the queen of the universe, albeit a temporary queen. Four people took care of me; I did not have to bother with any of the ordinary details of life that consume so much of people's time such as shopping for food and cooking it, or taking shoes to be repaired. Those errands had all been done for me. I had only three jobs: to prepare for classes, to teach them, and to keep my correspondence up-to-date. The rest of the time I spent any way I chose -- practicing calligraphy, reading, journal writing, walking, meditating. As if that were not wonderful enough, I had complete latitude in my job and could be as creative as I chose.

Here, I was not the queen of anything. Even in my own home. It was expected, rightfully, that I would assume most of those housekeeping jobs that I had always done prior to China. But, I did not want to settle down into my old life. I no longer wanted anything to do with domesticity because I realized in Daqing how much time had been freed for professional work when someone else took charge of the housekeeping. My household seemed unnecessarily complicated; managing it was a bore and an intrusion. I resolved to simplify it as much as possible.

About a year ago, when I could say that I had returned, not just physically but psychologically, I met a woman who had lived in China for two years. We both laughed when she recalled her first food shopping trip to an enormous suburban supermarket, the antithesis of Chinese village food stalls. She had been standing at the end of a very long line, fuming. She said, "I felt that since I was an American woman who had learned Chinese, I should go to the head of the line, because I was so special." I understood exactly what she meant. Also, my husband recently mentioned how charged the emotional atmosphere was when I first returned and that I cried when I first spoke to my children. I don't remember that at all. I thought I was making a great effort to be calm and to adapt.

For the first month after my return, there was only one reason for a conversation and that was for me to talk about China. But after the first few times, I saw a glazed look pass over my children's faces; I could hear them thinking: Oh, here she goes again: China, China. It's so boring. But to me, it was the only vital topic to discuss. I was bursting with the need to integrate and share my China experience. Everything was compared to China, all international affairs were interpreted in relation to China, and lo, I was the pontificating Sinologist.

I realized that everyone else had also lived during the year I was away, and I was interested in their affairs, but what no one understood, and what I myself did not understand at that time, was that I had not merely lived through that year. That year was not just an experience. It was one of THE experiences of my life. It divided my life into before China and after China. Everything I had done previously -- my education, parenthood, the thirty countries I had visited, the year in England -- was all preparation. In each of the four years prior to going to China, I had undertaken rigorous "survival" trips. One year, I traveled alone for a month through the entire chain of the Outer Hebrides. The following year, I lived in the Australian outback searching for archaeological artifacts. Then, accompanied by another woman, I traversed the island of Bali. And the year before I went to China, she and I traveled from Bangkok to Singapore by public bus. The transportation charge for the entire 1,000 mile journey was $37.25. We had some wild experiences, a few could even be called life-threatening. We were stoned by a group of Moslem women and just barely got away in time. So it wasn't as if I had had a dull life. But China made an impact on me as nothing else ever had.

These previous experiences with their concomitant coping skills had served to alert me to the extreme cultural differences that would otherwise have confused and alienated me after my arrival in Daqing. It is true that at times I was confounded, even antagonized, when I had to confront situations that caused me to examine my own prejudices and cultural biases. I learned about another side of life on my Asian trips and consider them an essential part of my preparation for Daqing.

I remember an incident in Daqing when I was scandalized because two of my students handed in identical papers for a creative writing assignment. When I quietly confronted them with their papers, they both insisted that the identical thoughts had occurred to each of them at the same time. I knew that they were trying to save face. In my heart I called them liars, but I said nothing. They reacted to my silent stare by bursting into tears, loudly protesting that they were the most truthful of students. Two minutes later, I saw them laughing in the hallway. They never expected to be challenged on the similarity of their papers, assuming that I would have the good manners to say nothing. I understood only a fraction of what was going on, but at least I understood that I had to view that incident from another perspective. Had I had less exposure to Asian life, I probably would have reacted differently, badly.

Here I would like to make a plea for middle-aged people like myself to consider an overseas assignment. Usually, we are better educated, our general knowledge is more extensive, and we have acquired coping skills through life experiences that one simp-

ly cannot have when one is twenty-three years old. These skills, I believe, result in a more balanced, mature attitude and enable one to discern the difference between a crisis and a temporary situation. I learned through reading, but mainly through my back-country trips, to look at the world with another set of eyes. In middle age we can afford to do that, unthreatened, because our personal identities are established and our egos generally are not fragile. For those of us who have children, we have some freedom of movement as they are usually not living at home. Furthermore, in a country as traditional as China, age merits respect.

Back in New York, I was keenly aware of what I had left behind. I was missing the stimulation of a hospitable foreign environment, my special place in the Daqing College world, my staff and my students. I missed their insatiable questioning, their points of view. I especially missed the intangibles, the cultural differences that impressed me so and that formed the basis for hundreds of conversations with my students, the teachers, and my aide. I have already mentioned some of these differences, such as the collective spirit and the discretion that characterized their relationships. There were other differences between my native culture and theirs that made me feel that I had come home to China. Living there, for instance, sharpened my sense of history. In America, people seem to think that ancient history is what happened yesterday and is of little interest or importance. But the Chinese feel that time is seamless; their history is conceptualized as a morality play, as education. This sense of continuity permeates their conversations. The long-dead dynastic figures are seen as contemporary living beings to whom they, my students, felt connected. They walked with their ancestors.

Two incidents highlight this internalized sense of history. First, when word got around that I was studying and practicing Tang Dynasty calligraphy, several people mentioned Madam Wei to me. They spoke about her with so much friendliness and enthusiasm that I was positive she lived on campus. One day, I almost committed the terrible faux-pas of asking to meet her. But something thankfully stopped me. That afternoon I read that Madam Wei had lived in the third century during the Han Dynasty. She was as real to them as I was.

Second, when I first arrived in Daqing, I used the word "Manchuria" to describe the northern part of China. Zhong Yan, my ever-helpful aide, advised me not to mention that word. She offered no explanation, and I, noting her withdrawal, did not ask for one. But this incident immediately sensitized me to the acute and delicate historical feelings of the Chinese. To the people with whom I came in contact, the word "Manchuria" still thundered with all the horrors associated with the Japanese in-

vasion fifty-five years ago. That watershed in their history along with all the other events that had shaped Chinese civilization for thousands of years was as current to them as the daily newspaper, and perhaps more meaningful, since it provided their basic frame of reference. Many of us have heard north Europeans say, "Oh, why bother discussing World War II? It was so long ago. There's no point in your endless questions." No one with any sense would ever say that to a Chinese person. Thinking about these aspects of my life in Daqing, everything seemed special there. Here in my own home, I was upset, alienated. Was I asking too much?

My extended circle reacted to my return predictably. There were those who supported me, but the loudest, most insistent, and even today, most frequent voices did not. A woman who leaves her family to work abroad can expect to be criticized frequently. Two weeks before I flew to China, an elderly woman who has traveled only when someone has taken her demanded from me, arms akimbo, "Have you planned your husband's meals? After all, you are going to be away for a year!" "No," I answered, "I never gave them a thought. He's a fifty-one year old man and has been a board-certified physician for twenty years. I assume he can manage. Furthermore, our marriage is not predicated on his stomach function." I tell this story to encourage those who might be cowed.

Although they were never asked, many people did not hesitate to tell me that they disapproved of the whole enterprise, that the year had been some sort of fling. In fact, one person went so far as to inform me that I had had a vacation. I was appalled and annoyed at people's insensitivity. How dare they try to place me on the defensive when I was still feeling raw? Where was the Chinese sense of discretion? Most of the comments related to my going to China alone -- a woman alone. Bare-faced misogyny. Several people told me that it was fine, even desirable, for a man to leave his family for a year. "Men sometimes need to do that; they need the stimulation, the expansion," a beefy businessman declared, "but for a woman to do the same is irresponsible." It made no difference to him that my husband's job occupied him sixty hours a week, and that both my children were living away from home. My husband has even been criticized -- in my presence! -- for "letting" me go, as if he did not care for me. I believe that everyone has a right to try to live out his or her dream. It was my dream to teach abroad for a year. I had a right to dream and a right to try to make it happen. So does any woman.

During my readaptation time, walking around the reservoir in Central Park was a poor substitute for the dirt road behind the college. I craved the sense of ease and freedom I had enjoyed there. The park walk soured for me and became frightening (that word

again) after I read about a rape that occurred there at sundown one August evening. I tried to puzzle out American society, which I found incomprehensible. (To some extent, I still do.) Perhaps it is more precise to say that I did not want to admit that I did understand it. I was horrified at what I understood and in disagreement with many of my society's basic premises. Reading American magazines and newspaper clippings in Daqing had not really kept me up-to-date. The country I had been reading about seemed more and more remote and the culture more and more crazy. I did not want to be part of it because I had found so much in Chinese culture that deeply appealed to me. Many basic American cultural assumptions make no sense to me. I do not believe that more is better, that it is wise to borrow now and pay later (or never), or that history has no place in current affairs. I believe that it is socially destructive to pursue policies geared to the short-sighted monthly balance and to brazen competitiveness.

I have already mentioned that I was able to choose my own selections for the teachers' class in China. One day, we read Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener." The class was able to appreciate the work for the masterpiece it is and we had many hours of discussion about it. But they thought it so unreal, so inconceivable as to be science fiction. Not one of the thirteen members of the class could imagine a person so unconnected that he is like a dead letter, unknown, unwanted, disintegrating and withering away from soul sickness. When I tried to explain that this sort of isolation is not unusual in America, no one believed me. "Where is his family?" "His friends?" "What about his neighbors?" They realized I was speaking the truth only after I showed them a clipping that I had just received in my mail. It was headlined, "38,000 Homeless in City."

I spent a lot of time trying to explain American pluralism to my students. It was incomprehensible to them and interpreted as chaos. They would always point to our sore spots -- homelessness, crime, family breakdown, a poverty-stricken unemployed and unemployable underclass.

One day, my cooperating teacher asked if it would be possible for the teachers' class to read a great American drama. I was delighted with his request and immediately selected Tennessee William's heartbreaking play, "The Glass Menagerie." I mailed an S.O.S. to my husband and soon received a copy of the play and a tape of the original cast recording. That was an inspired choice. The teachers were thrilled with being able to hear the actors' voices and moved beyond words by the play's beauty and message. When Laura finally blew out the candles, no one could speak.

Soon I received a request for another drama, and buoyed by my success with "Menagerie," I selected what I thought would be another winner, "Death of a Salesman," one of our cultural citadels. Who does not sympathize with Willy Loman? The Chinese teachers, that's who. I could not have chosen anything worse. The class listened to the original cast politely, but I realized that everyone in the room was tense and uncommunicative. Finally, an avalanche of unexpected comments fell about me. "Willy Loman was a horrible man. He stole everything. But what is worse, he encouraged his children to steal -- the basketballs, the lumber." "Why even the very cement for the steps leading to his home was stolen." "He was a crook and blamed others for his own failing." They demolished the play. Not only did they not sympathize with Willy, but they thought Lee J. Cobb's interpretation hysterical, almost demented, robbing the character of any compassion. "But, what about Linda?" I asked. "Is she not noble in her way? So staunch and understanding?" Of course, they saw that, but in their eyes the play was unredeemable in that it showed the worst of American society without a glimmer of nobility. They could not understand why I had chosen it nor could they accept my assurance that it is considered THE American play. I felt as though I had been through a battle after that class. But it was very instructive, and I was grateful to them for piercing this cultural sacred cow. At home, I constantly thought of these stimulating discussions and wondered if I would ever again be in such a satisfying professional position where I could not only open so many locked doors but also learn so much. This brooding did not help me.

How did I get over this hump in my readaptation to my home culture? For many weeks I felt as if I were walking through an unlit tunnel and that I would never get to the end. Maybe there was no end. I worried that I might be unable to adjust fully to either culture and would always feel displaced. Where were my coping skills? I had been aware that I would need these to adapt to China, but I never thought I would need them at home. I thought I would just glide in. I realized that my immediate job was to place my Chinese experience into perspective, to integrate it as best as I could and get on with my life. Some people, finding reentry so troublesome, tend to negate their overseas experience and not use their newly acquired cross-cultural skills and learning. I refused to treat my entire Daqing experience as non-transferable. One China-returned teacher told me, "China is just fading into the twilight for me." I didn't ever want that to happen.

I knew that I had to decipher what was most meaningful in my China experience, transfer what I could and come to terms with what I could not. I would never again, for instance, have the special consideration that being a school's only foreign expert confers. But I could manage to organize a schedule that would allow for the blocks of time necessary for sustained work. The task of readjustment and transference is a for-

midable one and cannot be rushed. In a way, it is like jet lag -- culture lag. One must give the process time. Be Chinese; be patient. Still, I tried to take purposeful action and I did this in four ways.

First, I gradually began to meet other people who had also taught in China; it was most healing to discuss our experiences together. These were people whom I otherwise would never have sought out as friends. We were bonded by our overseas experiences and by the lack of understanding with which we were faced at home. We felt we were distinct, that there was a special consciousness in our discussions, that we were a special club, particularly those of us who had worked in isolated areas. We shared many good laughs at people's insensitivity and superficial questions. How do you answer someone who asks you, after a year in Daqing, "Oh, was it interesting?" Interesting! Best to simply nod. Why bother explaining? We were incredulous at the ridiculous generalizations about China. The Chinese are avidly interested in every aspect of American life, but here the general feeling seems to be that people know it all. After all, didn't they see "Heart of the Dragon" on television?

But I think these discussions were most useful when we tried to resolve some of the tensions surrounding our feelings of not belonging in our native culture. Most of us had experienced a radical change from a country that is barely and unevenly industrialized to a society that operates on a high level of technology and to a city that is a sophisticated world capital. We were generally dismayed at the values of North American society and had to face up to the fact that many of our own personal values had changed. We all had had extraordinary experiences that were to have a profound and lasting influence on us. These experiences did not just expand our personal growth, but were also powerfully educational.

We complained about the unshareable nature of our experiences. Every one of us had been confronted by indifference and appalled by insensitivity; we found that some of the very people whom we had assumed would be interested and empathic were narrow, not at all internationally minded. We discussed linguistic differences between Chinese and Americans. It seemed that an overwhelming number of American sentences begin with the personal pronoun "I." Trying to make contact with an old friend whom I had always viewed as culturally aware, I mentioned that Chinese complain much less about their physical problems than Americans do. "That's because Chinese don't feel things the way we do," she replied. I related this comment to a China-returned teacher and we remarked on its typicality, a complete close out, shocking in its blatant xenophobia. This occurred frequently. Whenever we would try to share some of our Chinese experiences, almost invariably the other person's private con-

cerns would take precedence and we would be left unheard, feeling cheated. We spoke about the three controlling cultural constructs in American life: Emotionalism. Expense. Ego.

Second, it was also helpful for me to advise others who were considering work or study in China. A few months after my return, I was asked to speak to a group of teachers who were considering work in China. In order to prepare for that presentation, I was forced to organize my thoughts in a logical manner. That was a steadying and extremely beneficial exercise. I would like to suggest that some sort of writing is an excellent method of synthesizing the process of reentry and is a satisfying outlet for one's emotional turmoil.

Third, I have maintained both a constant correspondence with a few Chinese friends and my study and practice of calligraphy. These have been critically important in bonding me to China and integrating the year's experiences. One of the reasons I chose to learn calligraphy, besides the fact that is had always appealed to me aesthetically, was that I knew it would be possible to find a teacher in New York City and that, unlike learning the language, I could progress solely by working alone. This art form, then, has become a major part of my life and has provided the bridge that spans the two cultures. It focuses me, it stills my mind so that I can listen to my inner voice. Through the triangular connection of my hand and my visible and invisible eyes, I try to get inside the soul of the characters when I write them. The effort constantly strengthens my bond to China. Through it and my Daqing experience, I can empathize with mainland Chinese people living here, such as my calligraphy teacher (who successfully straddles the two cultures). We discuss our differences and review Chinese and American reactions to the same situations. We share the news with each other, about his family and my friends in China.

Fourth, I searched for the most challenging job I could find in an effort to root myself in my home environment. I knew that it would be impossible to replace the excitement of being in a foreign culture, but I wanted to be able to feel once again that I was making a difference. In Daqing, as the only Western teacher, that feeling was paramount. I took a job teaching in a men's prison and that, for sure, is a different culture. But I missed the responsibility, autonomy, and status that I had enjoyed in Daqing.

Six months after returning from China, I could say that I had readapted. I realize now that the trauma of reentry is part of the growth/integration process. Discussions with

sympathetic people, writing about my Chinese experiences, correspondence with my friends there, continuation of the art work I love, working at my new job, and the passage of time were my tools in this process.

I had had a stark, unmitigatedly intense experience and I should have known that leaving it would also be intense. I still do not know how I could have adequately prepared for the shock of reentry and softened the blows that frequently seemed like an assault. Even though there was no one in Daqing to share my worries, I think that just being aware of the inevitability of reentry trauma would have helped somewhat.

I finally realized that I was truly home when I became less judgmental and perceived China and America as they are, as cultural entities, each with an up side and a down side, both of which I could criticize and laugh at. For the first few months after my return, I had scrutinized Western culture with a magnifying lens, and a negative one at that. Sometimes I ached with longing to be back in China. How could a visit to any bookstore compare with strolling through the fairyland of a multi-colored ice sculpture garden lit up just for me at dusk? Or the gratification of seeing my students' eyes when they listened, for the first time in their lives, to the original cast of "The Glass Menagerie?" It is not as though I had an overly romantic notion of what Daqing was like. I had, after all, lived there for a year. After experiencing one of those winters, no one can be romantic about it.

But certain aspects of that culture appealed to me enormously, and still do. I often feel that I absolutely belonged there. Thus, the Chinese part of me has been activated. I had never known it was there, unsuspected, somnolent, waiting to be awakened. The year I spent teaching in Daqing allowed me to expand my journey into the world and into myself, to ask what else am I capable of, how far dare I try to go alone, can I accept and complete the challenge, how much will I learn and will I be able to synthesize that learning successfully?

Certainly it altered my self-concept. Now I try for a balanced, realistic view of both Chinese and North American cultures, for a synergistic, or culture-combining, approach to life. To be sure, I value living in a pluralistic society where I have personal freedom and choices. But I read the newspaper with Chinese eyes. Had I not gone to China, I would have missed one of the most profound experiences of my life, an experience that expanded and enriched me in unprecedented and totally unforeseen ways.

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